

San Musical Futures

Ethnographic Video 5

Youth Agency: Case Studies in Cultural Action and Futures

Voice Narration by Lorraine Lionheart

SOAS University of London – PhD Music – (2020 -2026)

This video brings together a series of case studies drawn from across the research. It does not present examples in order of importance, success, or visibility. Instead, it clusters experiences that speak to different ways San youth exercise agency within constrained social, economic, and political conditions.

The individuals and groups featured here are not representative samples, nor are they offered as exceptional cases. Each contributes something distinct to the research — not because of how well they conform to external expectations, but because of how they navigate their own circumstances with intention, care, and responsibility.

Some of these stories unfold through education, others through music, performance, caregiving, teaching, or community organisation. Some speak directly; others communicate through practice rather than words. Together, they show that agency does not take a single form, and that futures are not imagined only through overt political action.

These case studies are grouped to highlight shared concerns rather than individual achievement:

struggles around access and recognition, the labour of cultural transmission, the tension between visibility and risk, and the responsibility many young people carry for sustaining collective life.

What unites these stories is not resilience as an abstract virtue, but commitment — to family, to culture, to community, and to the possibility of continuity under conditions that rarely make that easy.

This video does not seek to compress these lives into a single narrative.

It stays with them — allowing difference, contradiction, and unfinished trajectories to remain visible.

In doing so, it asks a simple but demanding question:

what does agency look like when dignity must be sustained quietly, over time, and often without guarantee of recognition?

Cluster 1: Education & Early Recognition

For many San youth, access to education has been shaped by separation, prejudice, and long histories of exclusion.

Schooling has often meant leaving home, language, and community behind — entering institutions where San identity is misunderstood, marginalised, or actively devalued.

Against this backdrop, the stories of Qoma and Xene are significant.

Both are San educators who navigated a schooling system that was not designed for them. They describe experiences of discrimination, isolation, and persistent pressure to abandon their cultural identity in order to succeed academically.

Their journeys through education required endurance — not only to complete formal qualifications, but to remain San in spaces where that identity was routinely questioned or mocked.

What distinguishes their trajectories is not only survival, but return.

Rather than using education as a route out of their communities, Qoma and Xene chose to return home — to teach San children within their own social and cultural contexts.

Their work challenges a long-standing pattern in which San children are taught by educators who do not speak their languages, do not understand their histories, and often hold unexamined prejudices about their capabilities.

In their classrooms, education becomes something different.

It becomes a site of recognition — where San children see themselves reflected in authority, competence, and care.

Their presence disrupts deeply entrenched hierarchies about who is considered capable of teaching, leading, and shaping futures.

Yet recognition does not always arrive through speech, qualifications, or institutional success.

Bao's story unfolds differently.

Bao is a young San girl who struggles within formal education and is often ridiculed for her learning difficulties.

She does not speak for herself on camera. Instead, her recognition emerges through movement, rhythm, and response.

When Bao dances, she is seen. When she dances, she leads. Teachers, peers, and community members speak of the confidence, joy, and respect she commands through performance.

Bao's story challenges narrow definitions of achievement.

It reminds us that agency is not only articulated through academic success or verbal expression, but can be embodied — recognised through the ways communities respond to presence, talent, and participation.

Together, these stories reveal how early recognition shapes possibility.

They show that when San youth are seen — whether through education, return, or embodied expression — dignity becomes a foundation for imagining futures otherwise denied.

BRIDGE - If education is one site where recognition begins to shape possibility, music is another — often more intimate, more fragile, and more enduring.

Cluster 2: Music, Care, and Survival

For many San youth, music is not only a cultural practice.

It is a way of caring — for family, for memory, and for futures that feel uncertain.

Bammonye's story reveals music as an act of everyday care.

In moments of illness and vulnerability, he sings to his mother, playing guitar at her bedside.

Music here is not performance. It is presence — a way of holding space when words are insufficient.

Within his family, song becomes a thread of continuity.

Bammonye sings alongside his brother and grandmother, passing melodies across generations through proximity rather than instruction.

His brother is also a musician.

After being seriously injured in a fire, he had to relearn how to play the guitar with a disfigured hand.

Bammonye supports him through this process — practising together, sharing performance opportunities, and ensuring that injury does not result in disappearance.

Music, in this context, becomes mutual care.

It is how dignity is sustained when bodies are marked by hardship and recovery is uneven.

These moments speak to the importance of family bonds in cultural transmission — bonds that many San youth have been denied through histories of displacement, relocation, and institutional separation.

For Bammonye, San music is not optional.

It is how knowledge stays alive.

It is how care is expressed when resources are scarce and futures feel fragile.

DT's story extends this relationship between music, memory, and survival.

Displaced from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, DT learned songs from his grandparents before relocation fractured everyday access to land, language, and ceremony.

Those songs now carry more than sound.

They hold memory of a place that can no longer be lived in freely.

DT speaks with urgency about preservation.

His concern is not commodification, but loss.

He fears that if these songs are not remembered, recorded, and passed on, something irreplaceable will disappear — not only for him, but for future generations of San.

Despite personal hardship and physical injury, DT frames his aspirations collectively. Music becomes his way of contributing to a future he may not fully benefit from himself.

These stories reveal the cost of quiet action.

Care takes time.

Preservation demands labour.

Holding culture together often happens under conditions of exhaustion, uncertainty, and constraint.

Yet through music, both Bammonye and DT sustain something larger than themselves.

They remind us that for San youth, cultural expression is not only about visibility or income — it is about survival, continuity, and responsibility across generations.

BRIDGE: FROM CARE TO CULTURAL LABOUR

Care and preservation are not separate from aspiration.

For many San youth, the responsibility to sustain culture becomes the foundation for imagining livelihoods, futures, and forms of recognition beyond survival.

It is here that music moves into public space — not as spectacle, but as work.

Cluster 3: Cultural Labour and Aspiration

For San youth, cultural expression increasingly functions as labour.

Music becomes a way to generate income, visibility, and connection — while remaining anchored in identity and responsibility.

Groups such as **Obligatto** use music explicitly to speak back to discrimination.

Their lyrics address disrespect toward Indigenous communities, asserting pride in San identity through performance rather than protest.

They sing in San languages with confidence, fully aware of the prejudices that accompany visibility.

Their work embodies a familiar paradox:

when San youth speak, they are often dismissed — but when they sing, they are listened to.

Obligatto's music is deliberately hybrid.

By fusing San vocal aesthetics with genres such as kwasa-kwasa and soukous, they refuse narrow definitions of authenticity that confine indigeneity to the past.

In doing so, they insist on the right to be Indigenous and contemporary at the same time.

These choices unfold within unequal cultural economies, where recognition is offered selectively and often on terms set beyond the community itself.

Braam, founder of *Unique Naro Boys*, articulates a similar ambition.

Through hip-hop performed in the Naro language, he creates space for San identity within global musical forms.

His aspiration is not only personal success, but to inspire younger generations — demonstrating that San creativity can generate futures rather than nostalgia.

Beyond music, Braam also works as a visual artist, extending cultural expression into painting and design.

For him, cultural labour is plural — a way of insisting on presence across multiple creative fields.

Tiroyaone brings a longer trajectory of experience.

Having performed San music internationally, including in Europe, he has witnessed how San culture is received on global stages.

He understands both its appeal and its vulnerability — how quickly reverence can slide into appropriation.

His insight reflects a broader awareness among San artists:

global interest offers opportunity, but only if accompanied by control, credit, and fair exchange.

Robert, who has managed San traditional dance groups for decades, speaks from within the tourism economy.

His experience reveals the complexities of cultural work — navigating performance schedules, contracts, and expectations while protecting the dignity of the dancers involved.

Rather than romanticising tourism, his testimony exposes its contradictions:

San culture is valued as attraction, yet San cultural workers remain structurally marginal within the industry.

Across these stories, aspiration is grounded in realism.

San youth do not imagine cultural labour as effortless or guaranteed.

They speak instead of persistence — of negotiating respect, recognition, and survival within unequal cultural markets.

These narratives resist the idea that cultural performance is simply expressive.

They show it as strategic work — shaped by awareness of audience, risk, and reward.

Cultural labour, here, is not about selling tradition.

It is about insisting that San creativity has value — economically, politically, and on its own terms.

Bridge: From Cluster 3 to Cluster 4

While some San youth pursue cultural futures through performance, entrepreneurship, and creative labour, others have taken on a different but closely connected role — working to translate cultural knowledge into advocacy, education, and political engagement.

These paths are not separate from music. They are shaped by it.

Cluster 4: Knowledge, Advocacy, and Political Responsibility

Figures such as Kuela, Samuel, Mangana, and Isaac occupy influential positions within San youth networks. Each has pursued higher education and professional training under conditions that have historically limited San access to academic and policy spaces.

Their journeys were neither straightforward nor guaranteed. They describe navigating schooling systems marked by linguistic exclusion, cultural prejudice, and separation from family and community. Persisting within these institutions required not only academic ability, but emotional endurance and continual negotiation of identity.

Despite these challenges, all four emphasise a shared commitment: returning knowledge to community life rather than extracting it for personal advancement.

Their work spans education, legal advocacy, community mobilisation, and cultural preservation. They move between villages, schools, and public forums — mentoring youth, facilitating dialogue, and engaging conversations about rights, history, and possibility. Their authority rests not only on formal credentials, but on sustained relationships within San communities.

Music remains central to this work. All describe music and performance as foundational to political consciousness among San youth. Songs and dances create spaces where confidence, pride, and collective memory are reinforced — conditions that make advocacy possible.

Mangana's work extends this engagement into cultural coordination. As a coordinator with Kuru Development Trust and a key organiser of the Kuru Dance Festival, he has worked to sustain one of the most significant gatherings of San communities in the region. The festival brought together participants from across Southern Africa, creating a space where music functioned not as competition, but as exchange. Though recognised on tourism and government calendars, its continuity depended on internal organisation and persistent effort. For Mangana, music is not only performance — it is a platform through which recognition, identity, and collective presence are sustained.

Their positions also connect them to wider Indigenous networks. Through conferences, collaborations, and travel, they engage debates on indigeneity, land rights, and cultural sovereignty. Yet they remain acutely aware of the limits of external recognition. Global visibility does not automatically translate into local change.

This dual positioning — grounded in community while navigating national and international arenas — carries responsibility. They speak candidly about the pressure of representation: being expected to speak for San communities while knowing that no single voice can do so.

Their work involves constant negotiation — between speaking and listening, visibility and restraint, leadership and accountability.

Bridge: From Cluster 4 to Cluster 5

If the previous stories trace how knowledge and advocacy move through individual responsibility, what follows returns us to collective practice — to the groups where cultural life is sustained daily, formally recognised, yet frequently misaligned with the institutional frameworks that evaluate it.

Cluster 5: Collective Futures, Cultural Labour, and Everyday Endurance

Across multiple fieldwork sites, alongside individual musicians and advocates, traditional dance groups emerged as vital social and cultural anchors within San communities. These groups are not organised around competition or individual achievement, but around collective participation, continuity, and care.

Members described the groups as spaces where young people gather regularly in healthy, structured ways — rehearsing, singing, moving together, and sustaining social bonds in contexts where unemployment, displacement, and social fragmentation remain acute. Participation was frequently described as essential to mental wellbeing, dignity, and a sense of belonging.

For many, traditional dance groups are also sites of cultural transmission. Through regular practice, repertoire is shared, rhythms are learned, and potential healers are identified and nurtured. Music here continues to function as it has historically done — as a means of restoring balance, strengthening community, and sustaining life.

Yet these groups also operate within constrained cultural economies. Participants spoke extensively about national music and dance competitions as one of the few formal platforms available to them. While these competitions are presented as inclusive, they are structured around judging criteria that often fail to recognise San musical aesthetics or performance logics.

San music and dance are not traditionally competitive forms. They are cyclical rather than linear, collective rather than individual, and oriented toward healing and social cohesion rather than display. Several groups described being penalised for performing what they considered authentic, and instructed instead to modify movements, rhythms, or formations to conform to externally defined standards.

One group recounted how, during a competition, a performer entered trance — a recognised and respected dimension of San healing practice. Judges, unfamiliar with this cultural context, interpreted the moment as disruption rather than significance, and the group was penalised accordingly.

What emerges here is not a lack of cultural value, but a misalignment between San performance practices and the institutional frameworks through which recognition is distributed. Recognition in these settings is mediated through systems that reward legibility and conformity, rather than cultural specificity or community-defined meaning.

Despite these constraints, the groups articulated clear visions for alternative futures. Many are located along major travel routes — including the Trans-Kalahari Highway and corridors linking Namibia, Zimbabwe, and the Ngamiland tourism region. Participants spoke about the desire to establish community-run cultural villages or campsites, where passing travellers could stop, engage with San culture, and support performances throughout the year.

Such initiatives would allow groups to retain control over representation, timing, and remuneration, rather than relying on sporadic competitions that reward only a few and rarely cover even the costs of preparation. These aspirations reflect a desire for recognition on their own terms — embedded in community life rather than imposed through external evaluation.

These futures are not imagined passively. They are already being prepared for through everyday acts of collective labour.

In D'kar, a traditional dance group organised a village clean-up initiative aimed at improving the environment in anticipation of future tourism. Under extreme heat and with limited access to water, members moved through the settlement collecting litter, clearing communal spaces, and discussing how they wanted their village to be seen and experienced.

As fatigue set in, the group began to sing.

The songs did not mark a performance moment. They functioned instead as coordination, encouragement, and care — lifting morale, sustaining rhythm, and allowing the work to continue. Music here operated not as spectacle, but as social infrastructure — holding people together through shared effort.

This moment captures something essential about San youth cultural action. Music does not only represent identity; it enables endurance. It transforms difficult collective labour into something bearable, even purposeful.

In these practices, traditional dance groups sustain more than culture. They sustain hope — not as abstraction, but as action — enacted daily through preparation, care, and collective imagination, even in the absence of guaranteed opportunity.

Closing Narration

The stories gathered here do not resolve into conclusions.

They point instead to the ongoing labour required to sustain cultural life in conditions shaped by inequality, displacement, and limited opportunity.

For many San youth, cultural practice is not a choice made freely, but a responsibility carried under constraint. Music, teaching, caregiving, and performance become ways of holding together what history has repeatedly threatened to fragment.

Visibility can create opportunity — but it also carries exposure.
Being seen does not always mean being recognised on one's own terms.
The effort to remain dignified, articulate, and composed is itself a form of labour, often unseen.

What emerges across these case studies is not a narrative of triumph, but of persistence.
Futures are being imagined and worked toward — unevenly, collectively, and without certainty.

This video does not ask for admiration.
It asks for attention.

To the time it takes to teach, to perform, to organise, to care.
To the cost of sustaining culture when recognition remains partial.
And to the fact that these practices continue not because they are rewarded, but because they matter.

In this sense, cultural action is not only expressive.
It is how presence is maintained — and how the future is kept open.